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# TIP SHEET: ASSERTIVENESS

## 8 Steps to Assertiveness

*Think about what gets in the way* of being assertive. Many of us are taught that we should always please others, that it is not nice to consider our own needs above those of others, or that we shouldn't "make waves" when someone says or does something that we don't like. Think about what gets in the way of your own assertiveness, and then think about whether it should get in the way. *A disclaimer:* If you are in an abusive relationship, consult a mental health professional before trying to be more assertive. Increased assertiveness can have the effect of increasing other people's passivity or aggressiveness in the short-term (things can get worse before they get better), and therefore safety must be examined in abusive relationships.

*Try the DESC formula*

- **Describe** the other person's behavior using a specific example
- **Express** how you feel using an "I" statement (and take ownership of your own feelings)
- **Specify** specific behavior **Changes** you would like to see.
- Keep in mind that the other person has the right to express their opinion as well, and joint problem solving may be helpful to come to a consensus.
- Example: "I felt frustrated when you did not wash the dishes last night. I would like you to wash the dishes every other evening" instead of saying nothing or saying "You never do anything around here."

*Learn to say no and to make requests* Think about what you are willing and not willing to do for others. Set boundaries that you are willing to defend: Sometimes a situation just isn't worth being assertive. Practice asking others for what you need (and keep in mind it is within their right to say no). Be clear, direct, and straightforward.

*Give feedback and state your opinions* Surprisingly, people who tend to be less assertive also tend to give less positive feedback to others; work on providing such feedback. Perhaps not so surprisingly, they may also have difficulty giving constructive feedback. To ensure feedback is helpful, make it about specific behaviors as described above. Finally, practice giving opinions about important and non-important matters.

*Receive feedback* Assertiveness includes accepting positive feedback in a gracious way (and not discounting it), as well as utilizing constructive feedback and not taking such feedback personally. Remember to speak up if there are items that you disagree with (here, it is helpful to point out what you agree with as well). Ask questions for clarification as needed. Your goal is to understand the feedback and take action on items that make sense.

*Think about your nonverbals* It is true that we communicate both verbally and with body language. Assertive body language is just as important as what you say. This includes making eye contact, speaking loud enough, standing straight, and having a pleasant yet serious facial expression.

*Stop apologizing* and saying "I'm sorry, but..."

*Practice, practice, practice* Assertiveness is a skill, just like driving. It takes practice in easier situations before tackling more difficult situations. And like any skill, it will get rusty if not put into use.

### What exactly is assertiveness?

Assertiveness is a way of communicating that is relatively easier or more difficult for people depending on the situation they find themselves in. Assertiveness is about being in charge of your own behavior and making your own choices. Assertiveness isn't a personality trait, but rather a skill that can be learned, like driving. Of course, certain personality types find it easier to be assertive, but everyone is capable of learning. In general, there are 4 basic ways people communicate:

*Passive Communication*—this type of communicating involves putting other peoples' needs, wants and desires ahead of your own.

*Aggressive Communication*—this type of communicating is overly harsh at best and abusive at worst. In a nutshell it involves making one's own needs, wants and desires the most important.

*Passive-Aggressive Communication*—this type of communication can be the hardest to detect. It involves expressing one's needs in a confusing manner, so that the person ends up getting what they want without seeming to have asked for it.

*Assertive Communication*—this type of communication is direct, to-the-point, clear and appropriate. It is respectful of yourself and others: Your needs, wants and desires are equally as important as the other person's.

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